

MICHAEL ASCHENBRENNER

January 23 - February 22, 2003 at The Cuttress Gallery, Pomona

by Orville O. Clarke, Jr.



"Horn Hole #P-35," from the "Polynesian Implements" series, 2002, glass, 19 1/2 x 14 x 2 1/2"



"Damaged Bones"
2002, glass



"Vessel Fragment #6", from the "Fragments Derived from Past Ideas" series, 2002, glass, 10 x 11 x 5 1/2"

The image of broken bones haunted its way into the central core of Michael Aschenbrenner's visual archetype decades ago as a result of war injuries suffered in Vietnam. That he built his career as a glass artist makes perfect sense given the implicit fragility of the medium. The pervasive attachment of disparate sculptural parts by wrapping also serves as a reminder of the body's own potential debility.

But then the smooth surface and colors that can be infinitely varied in their transparency enter the equation and the "ow" factor gains an added "wow" factor. That visual seductiveness is used to soften the harshness of expressive rhetoric is a key strategy in two senses. First, the initial allure of pleasing shapes and colors sugarcoats the emotional pathos, easing the viewer's entry into a more pungent engagement. Second, the resulting tension between the pleasing and repugnant activates the meditation demanded by the objects.

The various Damaged Bone series of collectively mounted small sculptures force you to come at this sensibility in rapidfire fashion. Each glass shape, pulled not blown, is a wriggling creature, a leg or a foot, a farming tool. . . held in stasis with splints and wraps. The title Aschenbrenner imposes removes any obligation to see the formal elements as integrated. The glass object has its own integrity, and the superimposed layer of material keeps it from falling apart even as it partially obscures it.

The interplay of functional and organic forms is continuous. Horn Hole #P-35 grafts a blue blade and a claw onto a pale wishbone of a handle. Funny how we are asked to imagine how these may eventually grow onto one another--see the dancer?--when we know the glass may easily be fused together in a moment. Or how a sweet little cup is both supported and squeezed by the serpentine form that surrounds it in Vessel Fragment #6.

Aschenbrenner seems to delight in knocking out tons of these little "parts," letting them then hang around--sometimes for years--before they find their way into a relationship with other parts from other times and other places of the imagination. Their eventual coming together is at the whim and will of the artist, and that is the end point at which they are allowed to find their way to us. Only, one has the distinct feeling, this is never the end of the matter at all.